

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## Year of the Shout-Down: It Was Worse Than You Think

By Stanley Kurtz — May 31, 2017

The 2016–17 academic year will go down in history as the year of the shout-down. But what actually happened and where are we headed now? The episodes that drew national attention: the Milo Yiannopoulos riot at Berkeley, Middlebury’s Charles Murray shout-down, the Heather Mac Donald shout-downs at UCLA and Claremont, and the Ann Coulter imbroglio at Berkeley, are part of a larger and still poorly-known set of speaker disruptions and related incidents. So let’s review the year’s lesser-known campus disturbances and consider both their import and what we may be in for next year.

The academic year began with a deftly handled shout-down at Georgetown on September 8, 2016. The event was a symposium on the career of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, hosted by Georgetown’s Center for Jewish Civilization. Since all Israel-related events must now anticipate disruption, the host, Professor Robert Lieber, coordinated with campus police and read Georgetown’s speech policy aloud at the start of the event. That policy permits protests so long as they do not interfere with a speaker’s right to expression or the audience’s right to hear.

At the beginning of the question period, a student began screaming about alleged Israeli “genocide.” Other students then pulled a large banner in front of the stage calling Netanyahu a war criminal, while chanting “Palestine from the river to the sea” (i.e. eliminate Israel).

Lieber calmly but forcefully called the screaming an utterly unacceptable violation of university policy. Police immediately led the chanting students out of the hall.

Meanwhile, when Lieber told the student who’d begun screaming about genocide to

either leave immediately or get in line to ask a question, she actually did enter the question line.

The audience withheld support from the disruptors, having been swayed by Lieber's initial reading of Georgetown's speech policy. And the disruption itself lasted only a minute or so. Administrators and others remarked later that this had been a model for the handling of disruptive protests. A student op-ed condemned the disruptors and called on Georgetown to adopt the University of Chicago's more extensive free-speech policies.

All this contrasts dramatically with one of the ugliest but least known shout-downs of the year, the September 2016 disruption of a debate about the Black Lives Matter movement at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The Michigan Political Union, a non-partisan student debating society, had announced a debate on the resolution: "Black Lives Matter is harmful to racial relations in the United States." This was not an official position but a claim to be disputed. Yet the topic was condemned in a student op-ed as out of bounds (the op-ed author had just interned for the Michigan ACLU). The student government quickly followed suit and condemned the debate topic as bigoted.

Days later, the debate itself was interrupted when about 100 protesters forced their way into the already-at-capacity room, with 150 to 350 more protesters spilling into the hallway and lobby. Protesters jeered and hurled obscenity-laced tirades at the debaters for an hour while chanting, "black lives are not up for debate." The debate was effectively shut down. (Much of this was caught on video.)

On advice from the university, the moderator had begun the debate by reading aloud the official university policy against protests that "interfere unduly with communication between a speaker and the audience." The policy also warns that offenders may be removed by police. Yet the several campus police and university administrators present during the disruption said or did nothing to stop the shout-down. Even post-debate, the administration offered no statement of condemnation and doled out no discipline to the many protesters caught on video. In fact, university spokesman Rick Fitzgerald absurdly said of the hour-long shout-down featuring obscene rants that he was, "glad to see protesters and event organizers engaged in

open dialogue.” This April, the student op-ed writer who helped galvanize the shout-down by declaring the controversial Black Lives Matter movement beyond debate was given an award for social activism by the school’s Women’s Studies Center.

Since I recently testified before the Michigan state senate on pending campus free-speech legislation, I consulted well-informed Ann Arbor students on the campus climate. They told me that the Michigan Political Union has since had to avoid other debate topics for fear of similar shout-downs. When it comes to free speech, the debaters and many others at UM, Ann Arbor feel abandoned by the administration. Yet the university’s representatives testified at the Michigan hearing that free-speech legislation is “an attempt to fix something that is not broken.”

The next major shout down occurred on November 16, 2016, when around 20 protesters repeatedly disrupted and then shut down the first half-hour of a talk by conservative pundit Ben Shapiro at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Protesters had set up a private Facebook planning event, “F\*\*\* White Supremacy: Interrupting Ben Shapiro,” to which Shapiro tartly responded at the opening of his lecture.

Claiming that Shapiro’s presence on campus was a threat to minority students, the protesters continually interrupted him with chants of “Safety!” Shapiro’s supporters answered back with counter-chants and angry calls for quiet. The university’s protest guidelines had apparently been handed out, and at one point audience members held up the sheets while chanting “free speech” at the disruptors. Yet police failed to enforce their own guidelines.

Shapiro had publicly complained before the lecture that only 3 officers had been assigned to the event when a substantial protest was obviously coming. After repeated interruptions Shapiro asked police to intervene, yet they refused. It turns out that demonstrators had actually arranged with university police ahead of time to disrupt and temporarily shut down the lecture. When the disruptors finally walked out, they confronted and intimidated conservative talk-radio host Vicki McKenna in the lobby until she had to be protected by police. The semi-chaotic event and its troubling aftermath were caught on video.

Although the university had actually enabled the disruptors, it issued a statement afterwards expressing “disappointment” at the interruption. One of the protest

organizers later cited the failure of the university to discipline anyone as proof that he and his fellow disruptors had done nothing wrong.

Afterwards, campus leftists petitioned the administration to ban the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) chapter that had invited Shapiro. They also called for YAF members to be forced into “intensive diversity training”. When I testified recently on campus free-speech legislation pending in Wisconsin, I met students who had attended the Shapiro event and were still angry and concerned about the administration’s refusal to defend free speech.

These events held plenty of potential for violence, with protesters forcing the door and aggressively berating debaters in Ann Arbor and chants, counter-chants, and physical intimidation in Madison. Yet without overt violence, and with the country distracted by the election and its immediate aftermath, there was no national attention. The February 1 Yiannopoulos riot at Berkeley changed all that, while also drawing attention to a violent shout-down at New York University the next day.

On February 2, comedian and critic of political correctness Gavin McInnes was pepper-sprayed during a fight with protesters as he attempted to enter a hall at NYU to deliver his talk. After treatment by emergency responders, McInnes began his talk but immediately faced interruptions. Then, about 20 minutes in, so-called anti-fa (“anti-fascist”) protesters burst into the room and forced McInnes to flee. Scuffles between police and protesters outside the talk led to the arrest of 11, including a Trump supporter. As at Berkeley, the advent of “anti-fa” protesters in response to the election of President Trump had raised the level of violence. Yet the shout-down pattern had been set long before.

As the country debated the Yiannopoulos riot and President Trump’s suggestion that federal aid might be withheld from schools that refused to protect free speech, few noticed the shout-down of Israel’s U.N. ambassador Danny Danon at Columbia University on February 13. The disruptors were a coalition of left-wing groups, including the Barnard-Columbia Socialists, Columbia Against Trump, and various anti-Israel organizations. Between 50 and 100 protesters disrupted Danon’s talk seven times, rendering much of it barely audible. The chanting protesters were booed by the audience, which cheered when security guards finally led the protesters out. Although

a Columbia spokesman claimed the disruptors would be dealt with under the university's rules of conduct, a pro-Israel student leader doubted that any discipline would result.

Following the Murray and MacDonald shout-downs, and just as the Ann Coulter affair was coming to a climax at Berkeley on April 25, conservative radio host Rabbi Daniel Lapin was shouted down before an audience of 200 by a handful of protesters at California's Cañada Community College. Lapin was speaking on the morality of capitalism. Although Cañada College has a policy banning shout-downs, administrators refused to clear the protesters and even left the room for a time. An exasperated audience began chanting in protest of the protesters. After 20 to 30 minutes of disruption and angry exchanges, the host YAF chapter had to sneak guests out a few at a time into a separate room to continue the lecture. Belatedly, a spokesman for the Community College District claimed he would pursue charges against the disruptors, but Lapin's supporters continue to feel that far too little was done to end the shut-down.

In one of the year's most extreme shout-downs, Robert Spencer, who writes on the role of Islam in jihadi terror, was shut down by close to 200 hecklers who screamed for an hour and a half as he attempted to give a talk at the University of Buffalo on May 1. Spencer was barely able to utter a complete sentence. Police and administrators present did nothing to restore order.

About 40 members of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) shouted down a panel discussion featuring Israeli military veterans at the University of California, Irvine on May 10. A year before, an SJP-Irvine shout-down had rendered a documentary on the Israeli Defense Forces effectively inaudible. That provoked a "warning" for the SJP from the university, dismissed by many at the time as a meaningless punishment. One year later SJP was at it again. UC Irvine issued a statement promising to review the latest incident and recommend "the appropriate course of action, if any."

Students chanting "F\*\*\* ICE" drove a representative of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office out of a Northwestern University sociology classroom, where he'd been invited to give a presentation on May 16. The chanting demonstrators were allowed to enter the class by administrators on condition that they not disrupt the

presentation. They immediately did so, however, driving the ICE officer out. The demonstrators, from various student ethnic and sexual identity groups, explicitly rejected the idea of any dialogue that might legitimize ICE. Administrators expressed disappointment at the disruption and said they were carefully reviewing facts in order to determine the “appropriate” actions to be taken.

If this is not a complete list of the lesser-known shout-downs of the 2016-17 academic year, it is probably close. (Although graduation addresses are a somewhat different phenomenon, the booing of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos at the Bethune-Cookman University commencement ought to be noted here as well.)

Obviously, shout-downs are more widespread than the most publicized instances would indicate. Yet even this fuller list underestimates their impact. Shout-downs of pro-Israel events, for example, are now a nationwide tactic, backed by a pervasive ideology. Each shout-down serves as a warning shot at pro-Israel student groups, potential speakers, and administrators nationally. The effect of a shout-down anywhere is to discourage pro-Israel events everywhere. You may not have heard about it, but campus Jewish groups have. The same nation-wide “warning shot” effect pertains to other controversial topics. How many professors will now invite ICE agents or order-control advocates to present to their class — or their school?

The ripple-effect of a single shout-down works on individual campuses as well. Democratic legislators at the Wisconsin hearing on campus free speech dismissed the problem as confined to outlier campuses like UC Berkeley. When told of the Shapiro shout-down at Madison, they fell back on the fact that Shapiro was able to finish his talk. Yet by causing 30 minutes of chaos and then stalking out, the Madison protesters were able to send a message of intimidation to students who might challenge campus orthodoxies. As I learned at Michigan and Wisconsin, a single shout-down left undisciplined by administrators chills speech and poisons the campus atmosphere long afterwards.

In short, shout-downs set boundaries for permitted speech and the effect spreads locally, nationally, and persistently if the shout-down goes unpunished.

And shout-downs are not being disciplined. Universities regularly move to calm public outrage with vague promises of action against disruptors. Yet rarely is

anything done. I know of no single instance of serious discipline for any of this year's many shout-downs. Unsurprisingly, UC Irvine's hollow "warning" for last year's shout-down did nothing to prevent this year's shout-down. Wisconsin's disruptors positively brag about skating free. Last year's student intimidators got an award from Yale, while the student who stoked the Ann Arbor debate shout-down received an award from that school's Women's Studies Center. Not only are universities failing to discipline disruptors, some are actually patting them on the back.

Administrative malfeasance on shout-downs is pervasive and profound. Despite public statements of "disappointment," administrators at Wisconsin and Northwestern effectively collaborated in the very shout-downs they later deplored. Police protection is frequently inadequate, and administrators often say nothing even when present at the shout-down itself. Disciplinary hearings are virtually unknown. Middlebury's hearings, held under intense national scrutiny and pressure, are the exception that proves the rule, given the weak sanctions that resulted.

If constantly broken promises of serious discipline are somehow secretly being fulfilled, that is also a failure. The point of discipline is to deter future shout-downs. Student privacy can be protected even as the results of serious discipline are publicized. Despite the protestations of administrators in states where campus free-speech legislation is under consideration, the system is clearly broken.

So where are we headed now? The optimistic view would attribute this year's occasionally violent shout-downs to passing distress with the election of President Trump. That is not persuasive, since the previous academic year's campus disturbances can just as easily be attributed to the Left's ascendance under President Obama. In truth, the campus left is now emboldened regardless of who's in power. The left is on offense for reasons that include, but also run far deeper than, whoever happens to be president.

The future now looks to be a contest between two trends: 1) increasing violence by a campus Left that has learned administrators will do nothing to stop it, and 2) efforts by administrators to prevent disruptions by locking out conservatives and other controversial speakers.

A fully empowered campus left unworried about repercussions will turn its violence and intimidation beyond visiting speakers to administrators, faculty, and students. This is already happening, as the nightmarish campus takeover at Evergreen State College, the UC Santa Cruz takeover, and various portentous incidents elsewhere indicate. Almost every speaker shout-down holds the potential for student-on-student violence, since many feature competing chants and angry back-and-forth that could easily burst into a direct clash.

At the same time, as Berkeley did with David Horowitz and Ann Coulter this year, administrators will find ways to manipulate the rules to shut out controversial speakers. They will police shout-downs not by disciplining disruptors but by kowtowing to Left's speech boundaries.

One potential outcome would be broader civil violence as members of the public jump into the chaotic disciplinary vacuum to support their own side. We've seen glimmers of this already at Berkeley.

The only realistic alternative to a race between violence and silence is campus free-speech legislation that directly addresses shout-downs. Only the Goldwater proposal does that.

—*Stanley Kurtz is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center*